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AUTHOR Kariuki, Patrick; Harris, Carmen
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the family has been portrayed in children's literature from the 1950s to the 1990s. Five sample books from each era were randomly selected from the collection of children's literature books from one major university, two colleges, and three public libraries, and each book was examined for content and illustrations. Data on how the family was portrayed were compared to establish trends. The results indicate that over this period of time, the family has moved from a traditional lifestyle to a variety of lifestyles. The types of families portrayed in the literature include divorce or single parent homes, blended families, ethnic families, same-sex families, and extended families. Some issues families are facing include AIDS (cause and effect), inner-city housing, and death of a family member or friend. Educators and parents should be aware of the trends of how families are being portrayed and the emotional repercussions this may have on children. With this awareness they can help children understand their changing environments. (Contains 36 references.) (JDM)

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Running heading: Trends in children's literature

Trends in how families are portrayed in children's Literature from the 1950s to the 1990s

Patrick Kariuki

And

Carmen Harris

Milligan College

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how the family has been portrayed in children's literature from the 1950s to the 1990s. Five sample books from each era (1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s) were randomly selected from the collection of children's literature books from one major university, two colleges, and three public libraries. The sample books were examined for content and illustrations. Data on how the family was portrayed were recorded and compared to establish the trends. The results indicated that the family has moved from traditional to a variety of life-styles. Other types of families have surfaced including Divorces or single parent homes, blended families, ethnic families, same-sex families, and extended families. However, the traditional family is still in the majority. Other issues pertaining to the family have included AIDS (cause and effect), inter-city housing, and death of a family member or friend. This study suggests that parents should be aware of the trend changes in the way children's literature has been portrayed for the past five decades. Controversial trends should be discussed and the emotional impact should be addressed.

Review of the Literature

Significant advancements in technology in the first half of the 20th century resulted in many changes in children's literature. One development in the early 1950s was the introduction of the beginning reader. Picture books during this time started to reflect the trend of diversity of the family structures, dwellings, and neighborhoods (Hunt, 1995). Similarly, teacher training programs changed their instructional objectives to reflect children's literature from purely entertainment to concept teaching (Hurst, 1997).

Lystad (1993) looked at how the family structure in children's literature has evolved over a time span. This study covered over 200 years. In earlier centuries the family was depicted with two parents both being caregivers, and a large number of children. In the first part of this century, the families were portrayed as being happy and having good relationships. However, in the later part of this century, the family unit was broken by divorce and many social and economic changes. Other changes were the acceptance of a variety of lifestyles.

1950 Era

As a result of significant technological advances in the first half of the twentieth century, picture books became large, more brilliant and more affordable. Books and television material translated into joint ventures with the appearance of television (Lystad, 1993).

Authorities in children's literature viewed the question of moral, spiritual, and religious values from the perspective of analysis

of a single work or set of works (Henke, 1982, Patterson, 1983, Szedman, 1983). Other researchers attacked the problem of values by developing the Value Category Scale for picture books (Knafle, Westcott, and Pascarella, 1988). Knafle et al., (1988) suggested that children's literature be modified to adapt to the Value Category Scale for picture books. Ten values were identified in the selection of children's books, the most popular being "courage, friendship, love of people, humanness, ingenuity, and maturity" (Field and Weiss, 1987. P.2). The religious value messages that were conveyed through children's literature began to decrease. Religious instruction became of little importance with books published from this period. Books written to provide understanding of the human being and of human societies grew in numbers during this era. Laura Ingalls Wilder's influence on writers was still evident with the theme of growth of the families. The locale of stories was still largely rural. The locale related to main characters while half involved home life and environment and the other half scenes away from home (Lystad, 1993).

All the books from this era were a portrayal of family units where mothers were the primary caregiver and fathers worked. All the stories and illustrations depicted the same message of goodness and the ideal family (Sullivan and Yandell, 1990).

1960 Era

In the 1960s, societal concerns affected what was published and the breakdown of the nuclear family was noted in publications. Many books were published on how children actually lived. Many books published did not portray the perfect parent image which was maintained in prior books (Sutherland, 1991).

Most of the books published were portraying families in a traditional setting but these had children rebelling, and family members not being happy. Books with ethnic families became popular in this era. Even books about animals had a traditional story. Most of the books published during this time had a rural setting but large city settings were coming on the scene.

As indicated, picture books increased during this time and gave rise to the classic definition, "a perfect balance between text and picture", (Egoff, 1981, p.249). Picture book creators relented to older, gentler traditions such as Beatrice DeRigneers' humorous cumulative story May I Bring a Friend? (1964). This was based on a childhood guessing game (Egoff, 1981).

Evidence of children coping with real problems surfaced in books in the latter part of this era. Problems such as a death, broken homes, life in housing projects, runaways, families in transit, handicapped, etc. were just a few of the subjects covered (Sutherland, 1997).

The sexual content of children's literature became more explicit in the late 1960s and into the 1990s. Joh Donavan's (1969) I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip contained a suggestion, quickly passed over, of a homosexual incident. Isabel Holland's book, The Man Without a Face, published three years later was definitely about a homosexual relationship (Egoff, 1981).

1970 Era

The picture book creators came to see the picture book as a vehicle for the portrayal of specific and complex aspects of childhood darkness. Alan Garner's The Breadhorse (1975) was concerned with the ritualistic side of childhood play. Many of these types of books were

for the tutored child. These wordless picture books could be defended as an extension of a child's imagination and visual stimulation.

During this era many children's books depicted divorced families and single parent families. The book We Help Daddy, (Stein, 1979) was still in the traditional family style but the illustrations were updated. All Kinds of Families, (Simon, 1976) was a book about many kinds of families. This book indicated nontraditional styles of families. The message from this book was that families live a long time from birth to death, but life goes on and so does the family. The book It Is Not The End Of The World (Blume, 1972) dealt with a young girl's denial of her parents divorce. In Sometimes I Don't Like My Mother, (Colman, 1979) a young girl had to deal with the death of her father and her mother's dependence on her. Other books written for children during this era were problem novels. These books were divided into two groups: one that deals with normal problems of family and others that focus on social or emotion topics. One such book is Blume's, Are You There God, It's Me Margaret (1970), which concerns itself with a family's move to a small town and Margaret's selection of friends not from her ethnic background which was Jewish (Egoff, 1981).

Another subject handled very carefully was death. These deaths were never intended to inspire fear, shock, tears, or a change in the reader's attitude.

1980 Era

Since the 1980s, literacy became a major issue in the world. The role of children's books in verbal, visual, scientific, and cultural literacy was recognized. Trends in juvenile literature reflected awareness that literacy begins at birth. Whatever the stage of development, an interest in reading depended on motivation. Babies

do not learn language because they are supposed to, but because they are surrounded by it. This principle is true with reading. Children who are exposed to literature at an early age become better students and acquire a love for literature (Hearne, 1999).

Many books published included many trends not seen before. The Patchwork Quilt, (Flournoy, 1985) was about a black family and a Grandmother who lived with them. The message from this book was powerful and clearly to the young reader. A sense of family and goodness prevailed throughout the story. A Chair For My Mother, (Williams, 1982) was about a Spanish family that lived in a big city. The family consisted of Grandmother, Mother, and Daughter. Their home was in a housing complex. Much of the literature of this era included families of ethnic backgrounds such as Jamaica's Find (Haville, 1989). Jenny's In The Hospital, (Reit, 1984) dealt with a young girl's accident and her stay in the hospital. Family structure was traditional except the mother was working. Another trend that began to surface was grandparents rearing their grandchildren. When I Was Young In The Mountains, (Ryland, 1982) was a recollection of the author's early life in a coal mining town in West Virginia where she lived with her grandparents and cousins. The young girl has to cope with not knowing her mother who is coming to visit. Another book from this era was Heather Has Two Mommies, (Newman, 1989). This book continued a trend started in the late 1960s. The trend was of the acceptance of families regardless of their makeup, which was same sex households. The story was very descriptive about the life of the two mommies before Heather was born. The conception of Heather by artificial insemination was a major theme. There was no evidence of conflict until Heather went to day care. The conflict came when the

other children talked about their fathers. This was where the acceptance factor came into existence.

1990 Era

In the early part of this era, 70% of American families were non-traditional. A large number of families still consisted of both mother and father working. Today's family meaning has expanded to include grandparents rearing their grandchildren and to homosexual couples (Gallo, 1997).

The literature written for children today is different from what was written two decades ago. First, graphic illustrations have assumed a more important role. An important change is visual pattern, which has come to be closely related to verbal. Prior to this, little concern was placed on publication of this type of literature. Now we have juvenile departments in most publishing houses. Two phenomena have helped to increase and hold the number of child readers. The increase in both mass and variety of books published and the interlocking system of public and school libraries are these phenomena. Other increases are attributed to distribution of children's reading material such as magazines, movies, radio, television and audio recording. Finally, with all this proliferation and increasing use of children's literature has come the quick rise of an elaborate professional corps concerned with producing and selecting material (Smith, 1967).

Teachers and those people working with children's reading may not believe that literature published currently is better than prior works. Excellent literature for children is constantly being published. The feeling of participation, actually of creation, of recent works has not stood the test of time. Developments of special interests and needs in

children's literature depends on many factors. Interest in authors, illustrators, new publishing houses, emphasis in certain subject areas or types of juvenile books, new approaches to subject matter, new methods and problems in the choice and use of this type of literature and the use in television, radio, and other types of media are some of these factors (Smith, 1967).

The literature for children written in this era covers a varied life style. In Ira Says Goodbye, (Waber, 1990), the story tells of friends having to say good-bye because of a transfer of one of the boys' father. This is an example of transit society that exists. In addition, the conflict and hurt shared between the boys is a central theme. Books about city slums were the setting during this era. City Green, (Disalvo-Ryan, 1994), is a story with this theme. A young black girl whose effort saves a vacant lot from becoming a junkyard was the theme. This effort helps the relationships and unifies the neighborhood. The next three books have the same theme the acceptance of homosexuals as families. These books are: Daddy's Roommate, (Willhoite, 1993) Daddy's Wedding, (Willhoite, 1996), and One Dad Two Dads Brown Dads Blue Dads, (Valentine, 1994). All of these books are controversial because of the simple, honest depiction of the gay family unit. The illustrations in these books are bright, framed watercolors. The purpose for writing the books was to help other families with similar situation. The message in the books is subtle with acceptance and approval being the ultimate goal. Love is explained as a new kind of love. The writers of these want the homosexual life style to seem normal from an early age.

In Betsy Hearse's Choosing Books For Children (1999), the point is made that there should be involvement of both parents and children

not censorship when choosing books. Many questions from today's world are written about in children's literature. Books about AIDS and the cause is just one of many that can incorporate books in a fiction and nonfiction cycle. M. E. Kerr's Night Kites (1986) and Theresa Nelson's Earthshine (1994) are two of many books centering on characters that must deal with a fatally infected member of their family. Many implications arise from such books. The emotional repercussions of children dealing with friends of love ones dying of this disease. There is no way children's books can be untouched by problems haunting our society.

After examining the literature for the different eras, children's literature has changed just as our society has changed. The acceptance of lifestyle seems to be the goal of most published works of the authors of today. The morals are still goodness in most of literature for children even with the controversial published books (Gallo, 1997).

Methodology and Procedures

This study was conducted to examine the trends in children's literature from the 1950s to the present time. Five sample books from each era were randomly selected from the collection of children's literature books from one major university, two colleges, and three public libraries. Data were collected using a family type chart that was used to record various trends that evolved.

Procedures

The procedures followed in this study included a random selection of five children's literature books from area colleges. After the selection of books, an examination of content and illustration was conducted. The researcher examined each book to see how the family was portrayed in content and in the illustrations. A chart was kept comparing the different family units by era. After completion of this chart, a summary sheet was made of the content in each book and illustrations noted and compared.

Research Question

Research Question: How has the family been portrayed in children's literature from the 1950s to the 1990s?

Results and Discussion

One research question was used to guide this study. The research question focused on how the family has been portrayed in children's literature from the 1950s to the 1990s. In order to answer the research question, data were examined from the 1950s to 1990s.

1950 Era

Because of the significant, technological advances in the first half of the twentieth century, picture books became large, more brilliant and more affordable. Books and television material

translated into joint ventures with the appearance of television (Lystad, 1993).

The religious values/instructional messages that were conveyed through children's literature are on the decrease and of little importance. Most of the literature has been presented with social requirements of understanding and kindness. Books written to provide understanding of the human being and of human societies grew in numbers during this era. The locale of most books was still in a rural setting where the characters were involved with home life and environment and some scenes away from the home. The traditional family was the predominate trend in books published for this era. The family was portrayed with the father working and the mother as the chief caregiver who stayed at home. All of the books reviewed for this era had stories and illustrations that depicted the same message of goodness and the ideal family.

1960 Era

Most of the books published during this era portrayed families in a traditional setting but the children began to rebel. This caused families to be unhappy and this was reflected in the literature. Because of the Civil Rights Act passed by the U.S. Congress, ethnic families began to appear in this type of literature. Most of the books published had a rural setting but the trend was shifting to the urban areas, particularly the housing developments. In the mid-sixties, sexual content of children's literature became more explicit and continued until the present time. There were two books published that had suggestions of homosexuality. One was very subtle while the other was definitely about a homosexual relationship.

1970 Era

During this era, many life styles were subjects of children's books. Many of the books published still portrayed the traditional family, but divorced families, single parent, blended families, and extended families began to surface in the content of these books. Other books written for children during this era were problem novels. These books were divided into two groups: one group deals with normal problems of the family and the other group focused on social or emotion topics.

1980 Era

This era was a continuation of the previous era with ethnic families on the rise. Another trend was books depicting the shift of primary caregivers to the grandparents. A major trend change began to surface in the late 1980s. This was the acceptance of families regardless of their makeup. This trend was same sex households. In addition to this trend, books began to cover themes that were controversial. Acceptance is the theme for this type of literature. Families were considered whoever made up the household. Same sex households were portrayed with the hope that children will accept and eventually approve of any kind of life style.

1990 Era

The literature for children written in the 1990's covered a varied life style. Books about the transit society, and the hurt shared by children involved in one of these moves. City slums and housing developments became major themes. The acceptance of homosexual families was another major theme. The message in these books was subtle with acceptance and approval being the ultimate goal. Love was explained as a new kind of love. The authors of these types of books wanted the homosexual life style to seem normal from an early age.

Many questions about today's world were written about in children's literature. Books about AIDS and the cause of this disease incorporated both the fiction and nonfiction books published. Many implications arise from such books. The emotional repercussions of children dealing with family or friends dying of this disease became a major theme. Children of today's world are touched by problems haunting our society.

Conclusions

When the research question was examined, the researcher observed changes of the family in children's literature. Traditional families were on the decline but remains a major trend. Divorce or single parent homes began to appear in books. Families living together began to surface. These were called blended families. Ethnic families were portrayed in books about Blacks, Jews, Latino, etc. and were on the increase. The extended families with grandparents as the primary caregiver became a major trend. Same sex families appeared with acceptance being the goal. Other themes that have appeared are social and economic problems, inter-city housing, and disease related problems with the death of parents, grandparents, or a close friend, etc., and the transit families (the global problem of families on the move). All of these different trends have affected today's world in children's literature.

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